As a boy, one of the first grown-up television programmes I was allowed to watch with my parents was the comedy series, *To the Manor Born*. If you’re old enough to know it, you’ll no doubt recall that the *nouveau riche* hotelier, Richard De Vere, has an elderly mother who lives with him at the manor. From time to time she comes out with pithy proverbs, her ‘old Slowakian sayings’, one of which runs something like this: ‘Always remember Bedrich: he who sits on the highest pinnacle still sits on his own backside’!

That phrase came to mind when reading today’s gospel. Last week Jesus said to his apostle Simon Peter, ‘You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church’. Hearing those words Peter must have felt himself on the highest of pinnacles, accorded pre-eminent among the apostles. But in today’s gospel, only five verses later, Peter receives very different words from the Lord: ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me…’. Bear in mind that ‘stumbling block’ can also be translated ‘stone or rock of stumbling’ and you see how pointed the irony is: Peter the rock of the Church is also Peter, the diabolical rock set in the path of Christ to trip him up.

You have to feel sympathy for Peter. In a flash of divine inspiration he has recognised Jesus for who he is: the son of God. That insight has given Peter new confidence. If he is the rock on whom Jesus will build his church, then it’s not surprising that he should feel able to offer his Lord and master some advice. So, when he hears Jesus beginning to predict the suffering that he will undergo – to predict also that he will be put to death – it’s hardly odd that Peter should protest: ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!’. As anyone would with a friend and teacher, Peter feels bound to caution Jesus: to avert him from the course of suffering and death. But Jesus’s reply could scarcely be harsher: ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’;

Why is Jesus’s reaction so extreme? Why does he seem to retract the name he has just given the first of his apostles – Peter, the rock – and instead call him by the name of the devil himself? The answer lies in the second clause of Jesus’s rebuke: ‘you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’; or, as the AV puts it, ‘not on the things that be of God but the things that be of man’.

In his confession at Caesarea Philippi Peter perceived in a flash of insight that Jesus is the son of God: his mind is set on the things of God because he has seen, as no one else around Jesus has yet done, that Jesus is the supreme instance in human life of the things of God. But, to start with at least, that glimpse of recognition is only passing. Hearing Jesus’s prediction that he must suffer and die, Peter immediately falls back into the usual human way of looking at things: the line of least resistance, the path through life that seeks to avoid exposure and risk. That is the natural human way and in some senses there is nothing wrong with it – it’s normal that we should have an instinct for self-preservation. *But though that is the normal human way, it is not the way of Christ*. ‘The son of man came not to be served but to serve’, and the path of service that he must follow is a path that demands a willingness to lay down his life. Had Jesus followed Peter’s advice and turned away from that path he would perhaps have been known to history as a great teacher, a great holy man. But he would not have been the son of God: the one who at every moment of his life did ‘set his mind on the things of God’, who gave his sinless life that we sinners might live, who became one with us that we might become one with him.
Where does this leave Peter? Which is he: Peter the rock; or Peter the stumbling block? I think we have to conclude that he is both. Most of us, rather lazily, go through life with the idea that people are either good or bad, but not both. And the Church has often done just the same, particularly in its arguments about Peter. The sentence from last week’s gospel, ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church’ was long used by the papacy to claim that it alone was the true church, that other churches were mere shams. In reaction certain kinds of Protestantism, even today, have claimed that the Pope is the anti-Christ of the book of Revelation: the stumbling block, you might say. And at times even we mild-mannered Anglicans have been every bit as bad. Two decades ago the debate over the ordination of women descended to not much above the level of name-calling; for both sides being for or against women priests became something like the litmus test of soundness. And the same is constantly threatening to happen now in the Anglican communion over the issues of sexuality: bishops refusing to worship alongside those with whom they disagree.

The truth is that if I (or any of us) seek a pure Church, one that is perfect in its practice, one with whose teaching I am entirely in sympathy, I’m likely to find that that Church has a membership of one. In reality the Church is bound to be fallible, because it is human; just as all of us are bound to be fallible, because we are human. At one and the same time we and our Church are both rocks and stumbling blocks and, unless we recognise that, our attempts to live together in unity are bound to fail.

Last Monday was the feast day of Saint Augustine. 1600 years ago Augustine thought as long and hard as anyone has done about how Christians of different views were to live alongside one another in peace and charity. He chose as his example the parable Jesus tells of the wheat and tares. The wheat and the tares are sown together; as they are growing the one cannot be pulled up without the other; it is only when they the harvest comes that they can be separated. The message Augustine drew from this is that it is not for us to judge who among our Christian brothers and sisters are wheat and who are tares. That judgement is God’s alone. Our task is to worship alongside one another, to serve God in one another. Certainly we are to help persuade one another of the truth of the gospel as we see it. But we are not to reject those with whom we disagree. So let us pray for ourselves and the Church, that we may know God’s will. In the words of Archbishop William Temple: ‘God is Christ-like and in him is no un-Christ-likeness at all’, and it is to the mercy of our Christ-like God that we leave the judgement of whether we and our lives have been more like a stumbling block on which the Church founders or a rock on which it is built up.

Get behind me, says Jesus. Not in front, but behind, treading the path of discipleship that leads to the Cross: the Cross of Christ, which is ‘a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are being called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength’ (1 Cor 1:23).